TELLS THE FACTS AND NAMES THE NAMES

CounterPunch

SEPT. 16-30, 2007 ALEXANDER COCKBURN AND JEFFREY ST. CLAIR VOL. 14, NO. 16

No Death Squads, No Torture, No Milton Friedman, No "Shock and Awe" Bombing; Just 150,000 Farmers Who Have Killed themselves In 8 Years

An Early 21st Century Holocaust

By P. Sainath

Here in India we, as a nation, are in the worst agrarian crisis in four decades. Nobody is exempt from it and it is not to be seen as the crisis of one particular Indian state or one government or one party. It is a national crisis, and we need to respond to it as such. It is a huge thing. In this crisis the suicides, however tragic, are a symptom and not the disease. They are a consequence, not the process.

Millions of livelihoods have been damaged or destroyed in the last 15 years as a result of this crisis. But it is only in the last three or four years that we widely used the word "farm crisis" or the "agrarian crisis". Earlier, there was a complete denial of any crisis. At least today it is established that there is one.

We can sum it up in one sentence. *The process driving this crisis is the predatory commercialization of the countryside and the reduction of all human values to exchange value.* As this process unleashes itself across agrarian India, millions of livelihoods have collapsed. Hundreds of thousands of people are migrating toward cities and towns in search of jobs that are not there. They move toward a status which is neither "worker" nor "farmer". Many will end up as domestic labor, like over 100,000 girls from Jharkhand in the city of Delhi, working as domestic servants.

The crisis is by no means restricted to India. It is a worldwide crisis of small holder farming. Small family farms are getting wiped out across the planet, and it has been happening for 20 to 30 years. It is just that the process has been very intense in India in the last 15 years. Farm suicides have caused major concern in Korea. Nepal and Sri Lanka have very high rates of farm suicides. In Africa, Burkina Faso and Mali have had similarly high rates as the cotton product there gets wiped out by the United States' subsidies to its relative handful of cotton barons.

Incidentally, suicide rates among farmers in the U.S. Midwest and other rural regions have also been extremely high from time to time, as I discovered last year when I spent some time on American farms. In fact, in the 1980s, suicide rates among farmers in Oklahoma, to take one example, were more than twice the national suicide rate for men in the United States – and it is rare that rural suicides are higher than urban.

We are witnessing in many ways the decline and death of the small holder farm. It is very important that we do something about it because we are the largest nation of small holder farms where the farmer owns the land. We are also probably the largest body of farm laborers and landless workers. If you look, there is a lesson to be learnt as to what has happened in the United States. In the 1930s, there were six million family farms in the United States. At that time, when India was just a decade or so away from gaining Independence, more than a quarter of the American population lived and worked on those six million farms. Today, the U.S. has more people in prison than on farms. It has 2.1 million people in prison and less than that on its 700,000 family farms.

So what is this process driving toward? It is driving us toward corporate farming. That is the big coming picture of agriculture in India and across the planet. We have been pushed toward corporate farming, a process by which farming is taken out of the hands of the farmers and positioned in the hands of the corporations. That is exactly what happened in the United States, and that is what exactly happened in a large number of other countries. This process is *not* being achieved with guns, tanks, bulldozers and bludgeons or whips. It is done by making farming nonviable for the millions of small family farm holders, by just making it impossible for you to survive in the existing agricultural structures. All these disasters unfold in the context of the fastest growing inequality that India has seen in her history as an independent nation. And understand this: when inequality deepens in society, the farm sector – always a disadvantaged sector – suffers the harshest blow.

The devastating growth of inequality in India

We are the emerging "tiger economy". We have a hundred thousand dollar millionaires, but 836 million Indians live on less than 20 rupees a day [meaning,

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We are the emerging "tiger economy". We have a hundred thousand dollar millionaires, but 836 million Indians live on less than 20 rupees a day, meaning, in U.S. dollar terms, less than 50 cents a day.

in U.S. dollar terms, less than 50 cents a day since the current rate of exchange is 39 rupees to $1]. Life expectancy in our nation is lower than it is in Bolivia, Kazakhstan and Mongolia.

Labor productivity in the decade of the reforms went up by 84 per cent, according to the International Labor Organization. The same ILO report informs us that while labor productivity went up by 84 per cent, the real wages of labor in manufacturing declined by 22 per cent (at a time when CEO salaries were going through the roof). So, in the last 15 years, we have seen unprecedented prosperity for the top economic tier of our population. And at the same time, the net per capita availability of food grain actually declined.

Hunger grew in India at a time when it declined in Ethiopia. A new restaurant opens everyday in some city of this country, but, as professor Utsa Patnaik, our leading agricultural economist, points out, the average rural family is consuming 100 kg, less than it did 10 years ago. A fall of 70-80 grams sounds trivial – until you multiply it by 365 days and then again by one billion Indians. Then you can see how gigantic the decline is. Since those at the top are eating much better than ever before, it raises the question of what on earth are the bottom 40 per cent eating?

In 1991, 26 per cent of farm households were in debt. That figure almost doubled by 2003.

As every minister and every prime minister admits, public investment in agriculture has declined very sharply over a period of 10-15 years to the point of collapse. Our foremost agricultural economist, Dr. Utsa Patnaik, shows that while total development expenditure as a share of GDP was 14.5 per cent in 1989-90, it was 5.9 per cent by 2005. I have often felt it's simpler to send out the Air Force and bomb the villages. It would probably cause less lasting damage than that withdrawal of investment costs us!

The suicides are appalling. How many suicides have there been? Even the number usually cited - 100,000 suicides - is a horrifying figure in 10 years. Yet it is not true. It is still a huge underestimate for a variety of reasons, which I will come to. But what is important is that the numbers are not the crucial issue. I think even the figure of over 100,000 is appalling enough. What is frightening is that if you look at the data, two-thirds of the suicides are occurring in half-a-dozen states that account for just about one-third of the country's population. Most of the suicides are occurring in cash-crop areas. The number of food crop farmers committing suicide is less as compared to those in cash crops. For the last 15 years, we have driven people toward cash crops. We have told them to export. Exports lead to growth. Regardless of who is in power, we have pushed them toward cash crops, and now we are paying the price of that movement. We have locked them into the volatility of global prices, controlled by rapacious corporations.

The other frightening thing is that the five or six states are also, in a sense, contiguous. There are other states which are pretty bad. Maharashtra is the worst. What is frightening is that in some of the states showing an ascending trend, the numbers might double in six years.

Many suicides are not officially recorded as farm suicides. If we project further the figures of the National Crimes Record Bureau, it is closer to 150,000 suicides in the 1997-2005 period. And that excludes eight categories of people. For instance, in this country, whatever you do, whatever laws you pass, our bureaucratic machinery will not accept women as farmers because there is no land in their name. So, there are no property rights for them.

Women farmers in the suicide stats

In Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh, 45 per cent of farm suicides in 2001-02 were women farmers. Many of the households in Anantapur rural areas are women-headed since the men have migrated. Even nationally, 19 per cent or nearly one-fifth households in this country are women-headed. But we do not count women as farmers. We count them as the wives of farmers. So, a woman's death is counted as a suicide but not as a farmer's suicide.

Incidentally, countless eldest sons have not been counted as farmers committing suicide because, in our traditional society, the land remains in the name of the father, who may be 75-80, until he dies. So, the elder son may be 50 or 51. He is running the farm. He faces the pressure. He cracks and kills himself. The bureaucrat says that this man is not a farmer because there is no farm in his name.

If you die and if you are found to be in debt, that debt has to be a bank debt to count as a reason for suicide. If it is a private debt, it is not accepted as a reason for suicide. In this way, thousands of people have been entered on the list of suicides but not in the list of farmers' suicides. There is also misclassification. There are migrant farmers who are not counted in it. People leave the place and kill themselves in the city. I do not even

CounterPunch

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want to conjecture what the real figure would be. I think the number (the official count, however flawed) is appalling enough to move this nation. It should move this nation.

Common factors across regions

What is common in these areas where the crisis is taking place? Cash crop, high water stress, huge indebtedness – way above the national average. If you make a map of indebtedness of India and the map of all suicides, they will converge very neatly. The highest number of indebted households in the country is in Andhra Pradesh, which is at 82 per cent; Kerala has 64 per cent. Karnataka has 62 per cent indebtedness among all farm households. You can see how the suicides match the indebtedness, which is thus one of the major causes.

Almost every suicide has a multiplicity of causes, not just one. What we do in recording them, though, is to record the last cause. I am indebted. My son drops out of college. I am unable to get my daughter married, and I am humiliated by the moneylender every day when I go to the market. My crop collapses, and the bank refuses to give me a loan. I go home getting drunk. I fight with my wife and then commit suicide. The next day, it is recorded that the reason for the suicide is that he had a fight with his wife and, so, he killed himself. The last cause gets recorded. That is natural, and that is how it is structured. But it conceals more than it tells.

The other common thing in the suicide-hit regions is withdrawal of bank credit. Agriculture tends to be more deregulated in these areas as in parts of Vidharbha and Maharashtra. You have a very high cultivation cost. That, too, is common in these areas. In Vidharbha, in 1991, it costs 2,500 rupees to cultivate an acre of cotton. Today it costs over 13,000 rupees per acre, using the new BT brand. [Bacillus thuringiensis (Bt) toxin genes inserted into genetically modified (GM) crops constitute, along with herbicide tolerance, the leading modification of food crops.] You are talking about a 500 per cent increase in the cultivation cost per acre. It is killing. It cannot be borne.

If you want to understand how gigantic input costs are, if you want to understand how massive is the industry for seeds, which we have left open to a handful of corporations to control and loot, see what is happening in Andhra Pradesh. You would understand how major a cost it is.

Andhra Pradesh, my own home state, is proud of its software exports. But the sale of seeds in Andhra Pradesh is worth more than Andhra Pradesh software exports. That's how huge the seed industry is. It is so huge that it is bigger than software exports.

We are running after software markets overseas, which is fine, but while allowing the seed market to be taken away absolutely by a bunch of corporations. This is not fine at all. That is how I said

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that we are moving already, at this level, toward corporate farming.

Farm incomes have collapsed

Look at income. Income collapse was a major part of the crisis. In several regions, farm incomes have simply collapsed. The national average monthly per capita expenditure (MPCE) of the Indian farm household is 503 rupees, pretty close to the below poverty figure of 470 rupees for rural India. Six states on an average have been below the poverty line, that is, below the 470 figure.

There are many households existing on a monthly per capita expenditure of 225 rupees. This is according to the National Sample Survey Organization. The per capita monthly expenditure translates into 8 rupees a day. With that you are going to manage your food, clothing, footwear, education, health and transport. What does it leave for any kind of life? You are always in debt. Fifty-five per cent has gone to food, 18 per cent to fuel, footwear and clothing. In all these areas, you will find a very high proportion of school and college dropouts. People with B.S. degrees have dropped out to work as farm laborers on the family farm in order to get it somehow going, while our agricultural universities have simply taken up the job of doing research for other parties like private corporations but not for our farmers any more.

How do the elites look at the crisis at the bottom? Let me quote from a leading economic newspaper of our country. One of its commentators says this with some disappointment: "The bottom 400 million are a disappointment". Why? They do not buy enough. I do not know what they will buy with 8 rupees available for per capita daily expenditure. "It is a difficult market to tap", the commentator concludes.

For me, the most painful thing is that second and third suicides are happening in the same households. In the 700 suicide-hit households that I have gone to and seen over the years, the most painful thing is that when you are leaving the household, when you make eye contact with the lady of the house or the eldest daughter, you know – do not ask me how I know – that she is also planning to take her life. You know that for all your boastfulness about the might of the press and the power of the pen, you cannot do a damn thing to stop them because that is how we are today as a society. That is the most painful thing for me. I've started avoiding that eye contact because I do not want to see in the person's eyes that she is also going to take her life. When a young widow takes her life, she might kill her girl child also because she does not want that child to go into prostitution.

Last year, the prime minister came to Vidharba. One month before he came there, I was in the house of Gosavi Pawar, whose clan is very poor. They decided to have three weddings at the same time because people had come from different regions and states. They had all gathered there. Gosavi Pawar, the patriarch of that clan, was unable to raise the money required for the sarees for those weddings. Humiliated by the moneylender, by the bank manager, and others, Gosavi Pawar took his life.

I saw two things. One that depressed me enormously and one that inspired me about the poor people of this country. The poor household had three weddings and a funeral on the same day, because they could not cancel the wedding. It would have bankrupted the clan

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had they gone back to Rajasthan, Gujarat and Karnataka or wherever, and come again. So, they held the weddings. The brides and bridegrooms wept. The most heart-breaking moment was when the wedding procession ran into the funeral procession of Gosavi Pawar. The people who were carrying his body ran into the fields and hid so that they would not cast a bad omen on the wedding.

But there was also something very inspiring. Some of the poorest people on planet Earth made those weddings happen. Everybody contributed 5 rupees, a quarter kilo of wheat, half a kilo of rice, one sheaf of banana, a coconut, whatever they could. But they held those weddings by community action, by public action. I felt so proud at that moment that our people showed the decency and dignity that the elite have so completely forgotten.

The U.S., the European Union were drowning their cotton growers in subsidies. Cotton growers of the U.S. are not small farmers, they are corporations. How many cotton growers do we have in Maharashtra? Millions. How many cotton growers are there in U.S.? 20,000. When we removed subsidies from our farmers, how much did the U.S. give to its corporations?

On a crop value of 3.9 billion dollars, the United States gave its cotton growers a subsidy of 4.7 billion dollars. It destroyed the bottom of the international cotton market. The cotton price at the New York exchange running at 90 to 100 cents in 1994-95 fell to around 40 cents, and from that date suicides began all over the world as prices crashed and farmers ran up horrible losses.

In Burkina Faso, hundreds of cotton farmers killed themselves. In July 2003, the presidents of Burkina Faso and Mali wrote an article in *New York Times*, "Your Farm Subsidies are Strangling Us". We were not able to take action against such subsidies. While our duties on cotton are 10 per cent, if you are a Mumbai textile magnate, then you do not pay even that 10 per cent. You get it waived in lieu of export of garments. Incidentally, if I am a Mumbai textile magnate, I can even get the cotton free because private corporations dumping cotton in India would give me six-months credit. With such credit, I can run the entire cycle from cotton to cotton garment.

So, I am essentially getting an interest-free loan, which I return in six months, and I have made huge profits. All these games are played around the lives of millions of people.

Role of the media

The saddest thing that happened last year was when less than six "national" journalists were covering the suicides in Vidharbha. Five hundred and twelve accredited journalists were fighting for space to cover the Lakme India Fashion Week. In that Fashion Week program, the models were displaying cotton garments while the men and women who grew the cotton were killing themselves at a distance of one hour's flight from Nagpur in the Vidharbha region.

The most painful thing is that when you are leaving the household, when you make eye contact with the lady of the house or the eldest daughter, you know – do not ask me how I know – that she is also planning to take her life.

We have deregulated agriculture to an extent where the quality of seed has now been graded much lower. When you buy a bag of seed, on the back of the seed sack it will be stamped – 85 per cent germination rate guaranteed. This is now 60 per cent. It means, if a village buys 10,000 bags of seed, they are paying for 10,000 bags, but they are getting 6,000 bags because we have lowered the standards. The seed industry, as I said earlier, is bigger than software exports. The agricultural universities have collapsed. The extension machinery, as the government of India itself says, is in a state of complete disrepair. At the time the advance bonus was withdrawn, we begged the government: Please do not do this as suicides could double. We were wrong. In some places, they tripled.

I have covered farmers who have committed suicide because they could not get 8,000 rupees at a decent rate of interest in 2003 and in early 2004. Then, I have gone back to my house as an urban middle-class professional and got a letter from a bank, offering me a loan to buy a Mercedes Benz at 6 per cent rate of interest, with no collateral required. What kind of justice is there in that society? Where is the humanity, where is the compassion and, above all, where is our sense of outrage? Where is the outrage about this fact that I can buy a Mercedes Benz for six per cent rate of interest without collateral, whereas a farmer who could buy a productive investment like a tractor is bankrupted by the terms of loan? There is no fairness in the system at all.

The indebtedness of Indian peasants has doubled, yet we have been told repeatedly that there is a massive credit expansion and, indeed, there is. I can assure you that it is not going to the farmer. How do you expand credit to the farmer when you have closed 3,500 banks in the rural areas? Rural areas have witnessed the closure of over 3,000 banks between 1993 and 2002. And more since then. Private banks are only now beginning to come in. It was only the nationalized banks which worked in the rural areas. There would have been no "Green Revolution" or expansion of food production without the banks being there and providing the credit for the farmer to do that. Banks have systemically withdrawn from credit, and banks have closed down.

There has been a diversion of credit to the upper middle classes, for urban consumption. The so-called Gramina Banks [the famous microlenders] are playing with hundreds of millions of rupees in the Mumbai Stock Exchange. The undermining and re-defining of what we call priority sector lending has a lot to do with it.

We redefine it. You can buy a Qualis or Tavera or Scorpio or other luxury vehicle – as an agricultural loan. While non-agricultural loans go to farmers who pay non-agricultural rates of interest, non-farmers are buying Taveras or Hero Hondas and Qualis with "agricultural loans", and this at reduced rates of interest.

Agriculture is not an island. Do not disconnect farming from the rest of what

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The so-called Gramina Banks [the famous microlenders] are playing with hundreds of millions of rupees in the Mumbai Stock Exchange.

is happening. The cost of living expenses have simply exploded across this nation. Today, health is the second fastest growing component of rural family debt, because we have the sixth most privatized health system in the world. If you look at the data, they suggest that nearly one in every five Indians, nearly two hundred million human beings, no longer seek medical attention of any kind because they cannot afford it. This is not because of accessibility or distance. It is because they cannot afford it. The same nation boasts of boosting "medical tourism".

The farmer is hit on all fronts. The landless laborers' plight is even worse. Last year, Andhra Pradesh started jailing elderly farmers who were unable to pay their debts. Now, the AP government has called a halt to it.

India pioneered the concept of "social banking". It was a Gandhian idea. It was recognized that there were some operations, some classes of people, to whom you advanced loans without expectations of huge profits. Like marginal or subsistence farmers. We have withdrawn from that idea of social banking. We all talk about moneylenders. One of the things which I want to tell you is that the face of the moneylender has completely changed. Please do not focus too much on your village *sahucar*. He is a very pathetic creature in the new dispensation. A whole new class of moneylenders has come to the countryside. The village *sahucar*, the small *sahucar* is committing suicide because his clients are bankrupt. Some have migrated, have run away, and nobody is repaying his debt. Who then are the new moneylenders? They are input dealers, the people who sell seeds and who sell pesticides, fertilizer and other inputs to the farmer.

Input costs have gone up to a point where there is no return. If you look at cash crops, you can find this easily. Take the case of di-ammonia phosphate (DAP). One bag of DAP cost 120 rupees in 1991. It costs four times as much now. Seeds of local variety were available at 7 rupees a kilogram. In Vidharbha, local cottonseeds were available for 7 rupees per kilo. You could get the bill (for transactions of that time) even now. Just 7 rupees for a whole kilo. It was 1,800 rupees for the BT cottonseed (per 450 gram packet) in 2004, before the Andhra Pradesh government took the Monsanto corporation selling the engineered seeds to court. It got the price dropped down to 725 rupees. I give full credit to the government of Andhra Pradesh for having taken that action. Today, utility prices have gone up; electricity prices have gone up, and the farmer is buffeted by a whole series of price shocks. At the same time, the output prices have crashed. The little district of Wayanad in Kerala lost billions of rupees on two products, coffee and pepper, which are not doing that badly at the global level. In just four or five years, they lost billions. Somebody else is making the money because they have been locked into a trade where the Spices Board, all our institutions, are operating on behalf of the private corporations and not on behalf of the farmers.

We can turn it around

I would appeal to you to read the reports of the National Commission on Farmers. There is something very important about the reports of the NCF. They have wide acceptance. Almost every major farm union in this country has supported it regardless of party – whether it is the Congress, or the Communists, or the BJP, or the Dravidian parties. Across the political spectrum, people have supported the recommendations of the NCF. Then, what prevents us from moving ahead on at least its major recommendations? What prevents us from creating a Price Stabilization Fund for important agricultural commodities the way we have it for petroleum? We do have a Price Stabilization Fund in the case of petroleum. The state kicks in when the price becomes unbearable and withdraws when it stabilizes. What stops us from using social banking techniques?

There is a rule, a law in this country that 4 per cent of loans has to go to the poorest of the poor. Over the last 10 years, we have not even fulfilled one per cent, according to the bank unions of this country. We have no protection to the farmers against dumping and the Western subsidies. We have not sought the revival of the agricultural universities as the National Commission has appealed for. We could do a five-year credit cycle. You can give the farmer a loan over a five-year cycle instead of making him go back on his knees to the corrupt bank manager every six months, every season. In five years, you will have two good years, two bad years, and one neutral year. So, you might manage.

There are many such recommendations, which we could use. As I said, it is not politically difficult to get them accepted. They have been accepted across the farming political spectrum. You are talking about 600 million people here.

There are three broad principles, which are on the larger canvas. First, do not treat agriculture as a headache or a cancer. It is not. It is central to the livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people. We have to approach it with reverence for what it represents.

Second, declare agriculture as a public service and treat it as such. Those who work in agriculture, they lose out a

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lot. Average incomes in agriculture are much lower than in any other sector. Let farmers be compensated for the food they put on our table. Those remaining in the sector should be compensated .

Third, let us end the hypocrisy of subsidies. There is no part on the globe where agriculture exists without state subsidies, without state intervention. In fact, the richer the country, the greater the subsidies – but they are not going to the farmers. They are going to the corporations. What we give our farmers does not even qualify for subsidy but as pathetic life supports. Let us not remove them. Let us honor those who put food on our table.

Many explanations have been offered for why farmers are killing themselves. One is, they are killing themselves to get compensation. This disgusting explanation is in vogue in Maharashtra. I do not know what to say about it. What do you do with 100,000 rupees? Do you have a wild party when you are dead? Again, those committing suicide are called mentally unstable. I might be mentally unstable and depressed if three people in my family have killed themselves and one is starving.

In its wisdom last year the government constituted a *mano vaigyanik dal* (a team of medical experts). Psychiatrists, psychologists, some very good people, very fine people, highly qualified intellectuals, were sent to the villages to find out why the farmers are killing themselves.

Do not treat agriculture as a headache or a cancer. It is not. It is central to the livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people. We have to approach it with reverence for what it represents.

They did a lot of research and studies. Finally, one old farmer got up and addressed these top doctors from top institutions. He said, in the typical Indian fashion, "Such an honor to have such big people come to my small village. I honor you. I touch your feet. You have asked us so many questions. You have given us such good advice. You have asked us this question: Do you drink too much? Do you fight with your wife? You have given us good advice. You have said: Do not drink too much. Do not fight with your wife. Do yoga. Remove your stress". He said, "Ask us one more question. Ask us why the farmers of this country, who place the nation's food on its table, are starving?" There was total silence. One of the doctors told a journalist much later: "We shut up. There was nothing to say. We had all the answers, but he had the right question."

P. Sainath is the rural affairs correspondent of *The Hindu*. This summer, he was one of six recipients of the Magsaysay Awards, often described as Asia's equivalent of the Nobel prizes. Sainath was honored for his journalism across the past two decades, describing India's farm crisis. On September 6 of this year, he addressed the Indian national parliament on the crisis. His speech was an indictment of the havoc that neoliberalism has inflicted on Indian farmers since the start of the 1990s and the kindred devastation of small farmers and pastoralists around the world. What we are proud to print here is taken from that speech. **CP**

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